

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE SOUTHEAST REGION NEWS RELEASE

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GULF OF MEXICO GROUPEL CLOSURE TO BE CLOSELY MONITORED

The Southeast Division of NOAA Fisheries Office for Law Enforcement and Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will immediately increase enforcement measures to ensure that all Gulf fishermen are aware of and adhere to current grouper regulations and the month-long commercial closure that went into effect today and will last through March 15. While the closure is the first for commercial fishing in many years, recreational fishermen should also be aware that it is illegal for them to sell their catch.

"We are confident that the commercial industry will honor the one-month grouper closure. However, during this period recreational fishermen may be tempted to try to market their catch," said Gene Proulx, Special Agent in Charge of NOAA Fisheries Office for Law Enforcement's Southeast Division. "Anglers should be aware that NOAA Fisheries law enforcement personnel and Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will be monitoring them as they return to boat ramps and docks to ensure that they comply with size and bag limits and they honor the current commercial closure."

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council called for the closure to ensure that three popular species of grouper—gag, red, and black—can spawn unimpeded during their annual spawning aggregations. After a NOAA Fisheries review, the Secretary of Commerce approved the measure.

The regulation provides that "From February 15 until March 15, each year, no person may sell or purchase a gag, black grouper, or red grouper harvested from the Gulf by a vessel with a valid Federal commercial permit for Gulf reef fish. This prohibition on sale/purchase does not apply to gag, black grouper, or red grouper that were harvested, landed ashore, and sold prior to February 15 and were held in cold storage by a dealer or processor." (Title 50 Code of Federal Regulations, section 622.45(c)(4).

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The Southeast Division of NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement will work closely with its enforcement partners to increase compliance, enforcement efforts and presence. Federal, state, and local agencies will conduct frequent joint enforcement operations in support of this closure.

A toll free twenty-four hour hotline is provided for reporting violations. Violation reports and questions can be addressed to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-800-DIAL-FMP (1-800-342-5367); or the NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement Hot Line at 1-800-853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov> or NOAA's Internet home page, <http://www.noaa.gov/public-affairs/press2001.html>.

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